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AUTHOR Hutchison, Ira W.
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ABSTRACT

Community professionals are dealing increasingly with family conflict and violence but typically have little training in this area. Family dynamics in the causation and consequences of intra-family aggression were studied in a project involving seven groups of community professionals, including lawyers, ministers, physicians, police, nurses, school principals and social workers. A series of free workshops were held, and 65 out of 200 invited professionals, primarily social workers, participated. Individual professional group workshops focused on learning the symptoms and manifestations of family aggression and violence, showed films about child and wife abuse, and provided role-playing sessions followed by intensive discussion. The main objective of the project, i.e., to impart a greater understanding of family violence, was achieved, but the augmentation of skills in dealing with family violence was less successful. An unanticipated benefit of the project was the "consciousness raising" among participants about personal values and the acceptability of some physical force in families as "normal." (Author/KMF)

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Ira W. Hutchison
University of North Carolina - Charlotte

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SOCIALIZATION AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Ira W. Hutchison
University of North Carolina-Charlotte

The seminal works of Gelles, Steinmetz and Straus on family violence have been particularly informative in stressing not only the complexity of violence, but the normalcy. While many people, both professionals and public, balk at including such "normal" aggressions as slapping, shoving, biting as indicative of "violence," it is increasingly apparent that such dubious distinctions are mainly a matter of one's value system. Thus, while the basic behavioral aggressive act is physical in some way, virtually all the attendant attitudes, beliefs, values, rationalizations, justifications, knowledge and so forth is learned.

Concomitant with the rapid increase in academic research has been the increased involvement of community professionals in family problems. Such involvement has been made possible by a variety of social changes, some occurring more rapidly than others: (1) a decline in the norms that family problems were "their own business," (2) the increased recognition by family professionals that serious problems were remaining untreated, (3) legislation which recognizes the rights of both wives and children in families to not be assaulted, (4) a genuinely humane social concern that individuals were being seriously mistreated and, not the least important, (5) substantial increases in funds for various programs.

This paper summarizes a project undertaken in the Charlotte metropolitan area, oriented to community professionals, and supported by a grant from Title I (H.E.A.) funds; this funding source is particularly relevant for family professionals in that it supports continuing education efforts. In most states family and family problems have become a high priority area, providing family specialists with the opportunity to utilize and apply their knowledge in ever increasing ways.

The title "The Family as Victim: Understanding Family Violence" was chosen as the theme for this project to emphasize family dynamics in the causation and consequences of intra-family aggression. While the family system concept is not new to academicians and family specialists there is still a strong tendency among many others to view problems (e.g. abuse, alcoholism) as being the problem of the individual rather than the family. For instance, while one parent may be the abuser the other parent or children may be passive cooperators.

The project was oriented to seven groups of community professionals who are often involved in some capacity with family violence: lawyers, ministers, physicians, police, nurses, school principals and social workers. Indeed, it is not difficult to see that a single family with a pattern of violence might at some time come to involve people in each of these capacities. Unfortunately, most of these professional groups (with the exception of social workers) have typically had little training in understanding family conflict and violence and are thus at a significant

disadvantage in working with this problem area.

The objectives of the project were threefold: (1) to increase the expertise of community professionals in understanding family conflict and violence, (2) to increase expertise in the management and amelioration of violence, and (3) to increase professionals' awareness of the work of others in providing support to troubled families. The first two objectives were oriented toward information and skill acquisition,the last to a better understanding of how family violence may come to involve the entire system of professionals.

Key informants in each of the professional groups were asked to identify approximately thirty other professionals in that group to be invited to participate. Approximately two hundred people were invited through a letter format; of this number sixty-five registered for the series of workshops (offered at no cost to the participants). The group was heavily weighed with social workers, with physicians and ministers barely represented.

The opening workshop convened all the participants who heard an address by a nationally prominent family specialist and then broke up into inter-professional discussion groups. The discussion groups focused on the issues which had been identified in the opening address, and then reconvened for the closing feedback session with the speaker. In succeeding weeks individual workshops were conducted for five of the seven professional groups (with physicians and ministers being absorbed into one of the other groups) which essentially followed the same format. The individual workshops began with viewing "Ordinary People," a very powerful film on child abuse. This was followed by extensive reaction/discussion by the participants focused by the workshop co-leaders on understanding the multiple causality involved in the abusive family. Midway through these workshops the Project Director presented an informal lecture which tied together some of the material from the opening workshop, the individual workshop up to that point, and laying the groundwork for the remainder of the workshop. The last half of the group-specific workshops began by viewing the film "Battered Women," and again was followed by participants' discussion. The workshop co-leader, a member from the specific professional group, generally attempted to highlight the application of the issues for the profession.

It was interesting to note some of the differential reaction to child abuse and wife battering. The discussion centered around "how understandable" and "how possible" such child abusive situations actually are. The film "Ordinary People" had been chosen precisely for the reason that it does not present child abuse in its most extreme and pathologic form, but in its more common form: the accumulation and coalescing of stress, touched off by some precipitating event, which occurs among basically normal people. Thus, participants were challenged to confront some of their own attitudes/experiences as individuals as much as they were faced with professional learning. The material on battered women, however, evoked a quite different reaction. While there was systematic condemnation of the abusive husband, there was also evidence of questionable sympathy for the wives who had been targets. The typical reaction from both male and female participants seemed to be "Why don't they get out...?" In brief, there was a tendency for many of the participants to condemn

the targets as much as the abusers. This provided the opportunity for discussing the issues involved in "getting out," as well as to discuss some of the shared middle-class values about violence in families. This brief summary cannot capture the richness of the discussion which takes place in an intensive workshop, but does point to some of the ways we differentially react to family violence. In these workshops, more than in the opening or closing ones, participants were able to recognize and confront some of their own values. It was this confrontation which may have provided the single most positive change of the entire series of workshops: the better understanding of one's own inclinations toward aggression.

This may be summarized as follows: aggressive impulses appear to be innate to our species. However, what we do with such impulses, our behavior, is always learned. We grow up with mixed values, norms and experiences about aggression. We learn to view certain kinds of aggression as normal and therefore acceptable; what differentiates individuals (again, excluding the psychopathic personality) is the range of what they view as normal. This was demonstrated in a number of role playing situations. One procedure was to have a participant play the role of a child who was being grabbed and gently yanked by the arm by the Project Director. Most participants viewed this as "normal" and therefore acceptable aggression. However, when exactly the same behavior was enacted but in the roles of a boss grabbing an employee's arm, the behavior became abnormal and therefore unacceptable. Throughout the workshops the learning of family aggression and violence was stressed: we learn who to hit in families (children, wives, sometimes husbands and parents), when to hit, how hard to hit, and how to justify our hitting. While most would argue that some hitting is not the same as patterned abuse, it is all a part of aggressive behavior.

The closing workshop was held approximately two months after the opening workshop and again convened members of all the professional groups. The focus of the final workshop was on the topic "Where do we go from here?" and dealt with services currently available in the area as well as identifying priority issues for continued attention. After brief presentations by a variety of different service providers, open discussion with inter-professional exchange was focused on directions for the community.

The evaluation of this workshop series encompassed three approaches: a pre- and post-test questionnaire, a three month follow-up evaluation, and observations/impressions. In an effort to measure basic knowledge about family violence, a simple true-false questionnaire was constructed using a variety of resource material, and administered at two time periods: prior to the beginning of the opening workshop and at the beginning of the closing workshop. At this state of knowledge about family violence there are relatively few "facts" which have been substantiated by extensive research; rather, most of what is known is based on few studies and is therefore easily subject to disagreement, interpretation and contradiction. For instance, some items were virtually never missed (e.g. "There are usually multiple factors involved in family violence," or "Maltreating parents generally do not love their children") while other items were missed by the overwhelming majority of the participants (e.g. "Alcohol is a major causal agent in family violence," or "Family violence is more likely when one or both spouses are agnostic or atheistic"). Some errors may be

explainable based on lack of information or interpretation. For instance, most people simply would not have read the study which finds agnostic spouses to be more prone to violence. On the other hand, most people do know that alcohol is related to family violence but tend to view this as a cause instead of as a de-inhibitor -- a matter of interpretation of the phrase "causal agent."

The first objective of the project was to increase and update expertise in understanding family violence; the project was very successful in achieving this objective. The participants scored an average of 68.9% correct on the pre-test, 86.5% correct on the post-test, an improvement of 17.6%. Overall, the data suggest that the participants began with moderately good knowledge about family violence and improved upon this knowledge. While it would have been easier to demonstrate dramatic gains if the participants had begun the workshops with scant knowledge, this was not the intention. The three month follow-up evaluation essentially confirms success on this objective with over two-thirds of the respondents indicating that the project had been very successful (68.4%). About a fourth (26.3%) indicated that the project had been somewhat successful, with 5.2% indicating somewhat unsuccessful and none indicating very unsuccessful.

The second and third objectives were evaluated using only the three month follow-up evaluation. The second project objective was to augment the skills of participants in dealing with family violence in their own professional capacities. This objective, as expected, was the most difficult to achieve. While it is relatively easy to teach new ideas and information, it is significantly more difficult to provide techniques and mechanisms for putting knowledge into practice. A minority (21.0%) believed that the project had achieved this objective very successfully, with the majority (63.2%) responding that the project had been somewhat successful; a significant percentage (15.8) felt that the project had been somewhat unsuccessful in this regard, although no one responded very unsuccessful.

The third formal objective of this series of workshops was to provide an opportunity for sharing issues and concerns with members of other professional groups. The opening workshop in particular was oriented in this direction and the closing workshop partially oriented to this objective. This intermix seemed to provide at least a beginning opportunity for sharing ideas and concerns. The respondents in the three month follow-up evaluation generally felt that the project had been very successful (73.7%) in achieving this objective, with minorities indicating either somewhat successful (15.8%) or somewhat unsuccessful (10.5%). No one responded that the project had been very unsuccessful in achieving this objective.

Summary

"The Family As Victim: Understanding Family Violence" was the title given to a series of workshops conducted for community professionals in the Charlotte area, and funded through Title I of H.E.A. The workshops themselves began in October and concluded in December, 1979. Over sixty community professionals were involved in the series of workshops which included an opening workshop attended by members of seven professional groups, individual group workshops and a final workshop centered on theme of future action. A professional participant who attended the three-workshop set (opening, professional group, and closing) would have amassed a total of fifteen hours of education on family violence: this included a keynote address by a prominent family specialist, informal

lectures, films on both child abuse and wife abuse, role playing, discussion with members of a variety of professions, and intensive discussions with members of one's own profession.

This project was successful in imparting a greater understanding of family violence to the participants, and in providing an opportunity for inter-professional dialogue on family violence. It was partially successful in augmenting skills in dealing with family violence. It was unsuccessful in getting physicians and ministers to be actively involved.

Perhaps more important than the acquisition of specific information or the opportunity to have talked with other professionals is the "consciousness-raising" about family violence which appears to have taken place. Many participating professionals had been quite unaware of the extent of both extreme family violence and "normal" family violence and the extent to which some physical aggression/violence in families is viewed as normal. Participants also had the opportunity to confront some of their own attitudes toward the use of physical force in families, with many reporting significant motivations to make changes in themselves. The planting of such seeds of change had not been included in the project objectives; nonetheless, these changes will (particularly if shared with others) contribute to a far more civilized society in the long run.

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For additional information, contact:
Ira W. Hutchison, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of North Carolina-Charlotte
Charlotte, NC 28207
Phone 704 597-2327